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Mihaela Mihai. Forthcoming: *Parallax*.

### **Theorising Agonistic Emotions\***

Democratic theory has had an uneasy relationship with the presence and functions of affect in politics.<sup>i</sup> Throughout her work, Chantal Mouffe has repeatedly **emphasised the importance of recuperating passions for political thinking and criticised universalist, rationalist thinkers whose accounts of politics**, to the extent that they take passions into consideration at all, conceive of them as **something to be managed or suppressed**. For such thinkers, she argues, passions are **perpetual sources of instability, located at the antipode of reason**.

Mouffe correctly invites us to see that **passions are ineradicable from politics**: they mark **collective political identifications** that constitute important **sources of motivation**. Following Lacan, she emphasises that we cannot, as theorists of democracy, ignore the affective forces that fuel and make collective identifications ‘stick’.<sup>ii</sup> Therefore, our goal should not be to repress but to ‘tame’ passions. Otherwise, we will face two dangers. First, there is always the possibility that undemocratic parties hi-jack passions and play them against the democratic idea. Such is the case of the extreme Right whose rhetoric often resonates with the angry excluded. Secondly, unless democratic institutions supply venues for agonistic encounters, passions can erupt publicly in destructive ways, as is the case of the recurrent riots in the Parisian *banlieues*.

In this paper I seek to sketch the contours of an account of political passions that I think could be compatible with an agonistic understanding of democracy. In a sense, this is an exercise in

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critical theoretical reconstruction: I try to critically engage with the theoretical presuppositions on which Mouffe's rather schematic take on passions is based. In the first part of this contribution I outline her understanding of the role of affect in politics. In the second part I introduce the conception of passions that can do the kind of theoretical work that an agonistic account of politics requires. My main point is that, if we are to overcome the dichotomical thinking that opposes reason to 'passion' and engage affect democratically, we need to conceive of 'passion' as **at least partially permeable to judgment and as transformable through agonistic encounters**. The third part gives substance to the idea of agonistic political passions and discusses two cases: hope and indignation. I chose these two because Mouffe herself stresses their importance for collective action and because current events have clearly brought them to our attention in ways that vindicate her claims. In addition, hope and indignation represent two different kinds of sources of motivation: affirmative in the case of hope and negative (or reactive) in the case of indignation. The conclusion recapitulates the arguments made earlier and reaffirms the idea that any theory of democratic politics that aims to recuperate affect must offer an account of how passions – just like reason – can be democratically engaged and transformed.

## I. Mouffe's Defence of the Passions

Throughout her insightful and thought-provoking work, Chantal Mouffe has been one of the most vocal critics of theories that conceive of politics in terms of rational consensus and reconciliation. Liberal and deliberative democrats alike are guilty of the sin of assuming the perfect transparency of the rational, atomistic ego and of radically diminishing, if not completely erasing, passions from their understanding of the political. According to Mouffe, the vision of the self and of politics presupposed by such theories is highly problematic and dangerous.

Against such views, she proposes a Lacanian understanding of the self as split, as lacking in essence and as irreducible to a conscious, rational ego.<sup>iii</sup> For Mouffe, the subject is constituted through a series of imperfect identifications in the symbolic order. No identification can ‘capture the totality and singularity of the real body, the close-circuit of the drives.’<sup>iv</sup> The self is far from having a clear, stable identity that is permeable to reason. On the contrary, it is perpetually seeking an elusive identity in which to invest libidinally. Passionate attachment to socially constructed collective identifications is what keeps individuals motivated and enables political action. Mouffe uses Derrida’s idea of the ‘constitutive outside’ in order to argue that collective identifications presuppose a ‘they’ against whom the libidinal force of aggression is directed.<sup>v</sup> The affective bonds that tie groups together and the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ constitutive of group identity make it such that conflict is an ineliminable dimension of politics. The social, as much as the self, is split.<sup>vi</sup>

This is why, thinks Mouffe, the rational self and the possibility of political consensus presupposed by liberal and deliberative democrats is implausible. Since conflict is libidinally charged and hence ineradicable, we should reflect on the conditions under which the public sphere could flourish as a space where various hegemonic collective identifications are permanently contested.<sup>vii</sup> The focus on consensus, she argues, is not only conceptually misguided, but also politically dangerous: in failing to give conflicting parties proper venues for democratic engagement, it reinforces and pushes them in undemocratic directions.<sup>viii</sup> The ‘we/they’ distinction plays a structuring function in politics and it can never be done away with. What we can – and should – envisage, is a way of transforming this distinction, from a conflictual relation that can at any moment degenerate into violence and negate the very

principles on which democracy rests, into an ‘agonistic’ relation, i.e. a relation that, while preserving the reality of conflict, puts limits on what political agents can do to each other. In Mouffe’s emblematic terms, ‘enemies’ must become ‘adversaries,’ and ‘antagonism’ will, when filtered through democratic values, turn into ‘agonism’. This is what it would mean to think ‘with Schmitt against Schmitt’: we follow his critique of rationalist democratic theories, without embracing his rejection thereof.<sup>ix</sup>

But how does this transformation happen? What does it take for enemies to become adversaries?

Conflict, in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association. This means that some form of common bond must exist between the parties in conflict, so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated, seeing their demands as illegitimate, which is exactly what happens with the antagonistic friend/enemy relations. However, the opponents cannot be seen simply as competitors whose interests can be dealt with through mere negotiation, or reconciled through deliberation, because in that case the antagonistic element would simply have been eliminated. If we want to acknowledge on the one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of the conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its ‘taming’, we need to envisage a third type of relation. This is the type of relation which I have proposed to call ‘agonism.’ While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognise the legitimacy of their opponents. They are

‘adversaries’ not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism.<sup>x</sup>

Taming the enemy and transforming her into an adversary requires nothing else than a modicum of respect for the ‘other’ as a source of legitimate claims, an ‘other’ that one may not exterminate. And it is the institutions’ function to make sure that that agonism does not lapse into antagonism.

At this point, one may reasonably say – and many have said – that Mouffe’s account is not that different from the very accounts against which she directs her critical force. Yet there are at least two elements that should prevent us from reaching such a conclusion too hastily. She writes:

Contrary to the dialogical approach, the democratic debate is conceived as a real confrontation. Adversaries do fight – even fiercely – but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives. The fundamental difference between the ‘dialogical’ and the ‘agonistic’ perspectives is that the aim of the latter is a profound transformation of the existing power relations and the establishment of a new hegemony.<sup>xi</sup>

It appears that at least two differences prevent the collapsing of the agonistic encounter into liberal deliberation: its style and its purpose. Given the interest of this paper, I will only address the former.

By ‘style’ of political participation I refer to the ways in which Mouffe envisages the encounter of political agents in the public sphere. In criticising the consensual perspective on democratic politics, she argues that any plausible account of politics needs to take stock of ‘passions’, understood as anchors of collective identifications and as motivational forces. Mouffe’s first contention is that blindness to the affective dimension of politics and its role in maintaining collective identifications prevents liberal and deliberative democrats from ascertaining the limited role that reason plays in moving people to participate politically. It is an idea’s power to inspire fantasies and to relate to citizens’ desires that moves them to engage with one another in the public sphere. Surely, this does not mean that reasoned argument does not have a role to play in Mouffe’s conception of politics. It just does not constitute the only mode of engaging legitimately in politics:

A well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions. This is what the confrontation between the right and the left needs to be about. Such a confrontation should provide collective forms of identification strong enough to mobilise political passions. If this adversarial configuration is missing, passions cannot be given a democratic outlet and the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered. The danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values.<sup>xii</sup>

Given the inescapable presence and importance of passions for politics, it is crucial that they ‘colour’ identifications with designs that – from the left or from the right – are compatible with democratic values.

The flipside of this is that, until we understand the role played by affective investment in collective identification and mobilization, we will not be in a position to understand the emergence and resilience of non-democratic collective identities: racism, xenophobia, explosive nationalism and religious intolerance.<sup>xiii</sup> In addition, we will be able to explain why the absence of meaningful democratic options will push citizens to latch libidinally onto non-democratic collective identifications. Looking at the party constellations in European countries in the 1990s and the 2000s, Mouffe argues that the absence of meaningful ideological alternatives to the left and to the right of the centre or, in other words, the convergence of right and left at the centre, meant that the political spectrum had become hospitable to radically non-democratic parties, with platforms that mobilised and gave hope to many disenchanted people.<sup>xiv</sup> Thus, passions anchored citizens’ commitment in political programmes that could no longer be read in the agonistic trope.

The centre, instead of realising its own failures, proceeded to moralise the political discourse and called those who adhered to these programmes ‘backward’, ‘irrational’ and ‘evil’. Yet such a response is clearly counterproductive as it deepens the antagonism: the ‘backward’, the ‘irrational’ and the ‘evil’ are enemies to eliminate, not adversaries to engage with:



When politics is played out in the register of morality, antagonisms cannot take an agonistic form. Indeed, when opponents are defined not in political, but in moral terms, they cannot be envisaged as an ‘adversary’ but only as an ‘enemy.’ With the ‘evil them’ no agonistic debate is possible, they must be eradicated. Moreover, as they are often considered as the expression of some kind of ‘moral disease’, one should not even try to provide an explanation for their emergence and success. This is why, as we have seen in the case of right-wing populism, moral condemnation replaces a proper political analysis and the answer is limited to the building of a ‘cordon sanitaire’ to quarantine the affected sectors.<sup>xv</sup>

Faced with such realities, the theorist cannot ignore the role that the affective dimension of collective identifications plays in the transformation of adversaries into enemies. The non- or anti- democrats’ mobilisation is anchored in passions. The centre, in spite of its repudiation of affect, is also acting passionately – out of a self-righteous indignation – in vilifying the ‘extremes’.<sup>xvi</sup> Therefore, it is imperious that we, as theorists, should rethink the role that democratic institutions can and must play in ensuring that conflicts will be played out agonistically – as opposed to antagonistically. The goal is not to eliminate passions, but to ‘tame’ them and foster forms of identification that are conducive to democratic agonistic practices.<sup>xvii</sup>

The issue we must address next is: what does Mouffe mean by the ‘taming’ of the passions? In the absence of proper venues for democratic expression, affect can come back with a vengeance and threaten the very existence of the democratic association. In other words, institutional

mechanisms must be in place for passions to be expressed in ways that do not construe the opponent as an enemy, but as an adversary.<sup>xviii</sup> And that requires allegiance to democratic values:

(...) democracy requires a ‘conflictual consensus’: consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, dissent about their interpretation. A line should therefore be drawn between those who reject those values outright and those who, while accepting them, fight for competing interpretations.<sup>xix</sup>

The ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all constitute an ethos that must moderate the passionate, yet respectful, encounters between political adversaries. Groups will clash over the various interpretations of these values, but nobody can be left out of their protective scope. The limits of pluralism are established by excluding those who want to do away with these ethico-political ideals.

The implication of Mouffe’s position is that passions attached to identities in tension with shared ethico-political principles or passions that are expressed in inimical – rather than adversary – ways, have no place in democratic politics. Mouffe’s idea that affect must support identification with democratic aims, i.e. must be made compatible with the ethico-political principles democracies are based on, presupposes an understanding of passions as malleable, transformable, sociable. As I will argue in the section that follows, this means that Mouffe’s account of passion presupposes a constructivist theory of affect, a theory according to which at least certain complex passions presuppose judgments and evaluations about various things in the world and

are at least partially constructed. In what follows, I sketch a weak constructivist theory of passions and show how Mouffe's views on affect implicitly rely on such a theory.

## II. Agonistic Emotion: A Weak Constructivist Cognitivist Approach

The concern with the importance of emotions for social life is as old as philosophy itself. I will not enter into the complex debates between the many theories of emotion, nor will I provide a complete theory of emotion. The focus of this paper is to delineate an account of agonistic emotion that can sustain the political project that Mouffe seeks to defend.

Before outlining what such a theory would entail, one note on Mouffe's use of the term 'passion'. In spite of Mouffe's resistance to the term 'emotion', I see her project as one of making sure that democratic emotions – and not inimical 'passions' – dominate the public sphere of agonistic democracies. Mouffe seems unaware of the fact that the term 'passion' has been historically used to denigrate affect as irrational, disruptive and undesirable in the public sphere. The term 'passion' alludes to passivity and to a supposed force-of-nature character of affect. An understanding of 'passions' as unruly lies at the basis of the liberal and deliberative democrats' reluctance to accept affect in the public sphere. Those who, like Mouffe, believe that affect is not opposed to reason and that it can be a productive force in social and political life prefer the term 'emotion'. In other words, an agonistic account of democracy must assume that citizens can be more than the mere slaves of their own passions: they must be assumed to be potentially responsive to democratic interpellations and capable of being partially responsible for their public affective expressions.

While this observation may be seen as a superficial terminological issue, it raises some concerns about the compatibility between Mouffe's understanding of affect and her account of agonistic encounters. The argument I will make in this section is that, if we are to follow Mouffe in her plea to acknowledge the role that affect plays in identification and in democratic practices, we need to presuppose that it is at least partially permeable to persuasion, exhortation, and reflection. The idea of 'taming' passions has too strong disciplinary connotations, connotations that do not sit well with an agonistic account of democracy that conceives of citizens as agents engaged in collective processes of contestation. Given her understanding of the difference between adversaries and enemies and her urging us to redirect affect towards democratic aims, I argue that a weak constructivist cognitivist account would serve well Mouffe's democratic theory. While the self is not fully transparent to itself, it must be transparent enough for democratic processes of emotional socialisation to work and for agonistic engagement to be possible between citizens.

Cognitivists strongly disagree with those who portray emotions as purely irrational passions, forces of nature contaminating the higher parts of one's soul. They reject the naturalist thesis, according to which emotions are mere biological responses, and argue that it unnecessarily impoverishes our account of human experience.<sup>xx</sup> On the contrary, they claim, emotions serve as a guide to human social interaction and motivate behaviour:

(P)recisely the role of emotion is to provide the creature [...] with an orientation, or an attitude to the world. If belief maps the world, and desire targets it, emotion tints or colours it: it enlivens it or darkens it as the case may be.<sup>xxi</sup>

*However, the aim of a cognitive theory of emotions is not to reduce the drama of emotion to cool, calm belief but to break down the insidious distinctions that render emotions stupid and degrading and eviscerate cognition.*<sup>xxii</sup>

In spite of on-going discussions as to the exact role of judgment, thought, perception, or belief in the morphology of emotion, cognitivists reject the simplistic opposition between reason and passion and argue that at least some emotions cannot be reduced to physiological reactions.<sup>xxiii</sup> Irrespective of its exact nature and relationship with physiological changes, the evaluative component of emotional states is thought to confer meaning to human experiences and mobilise individuals in pursuit of a variety of goals and visions that they identify with:

An emotion is a judgement (or a set of judgements), something we do. An emotion is a (set of) judgement(s), which constitute our world, our surreality, and its ‘intentional objects.’ An emotion is a basic judgement about our Selves and our place in the world, the projection of the values and ideals, structures and mythologies, according to which we live and through which we experience our lives.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In other words, emotions inform our life plans, our cultural and political identifications, and our sense of the self. An important distinction for understanding the cognitivist theory is that

between reason as a general capacity for thought and reason as careful reflective thought.<sup>xxv</sup> Cognitivists argue that it would be implausible to expect emotions to involve reason in the latter sense, but that it is clear that conceptualisation, interpretation, evaluation play an important role in affect. Richard Wollheim offers an important clarification on the distinction between the role reason plays in rational inquiry and the role it plays in emotion:

When thought is denied a place in emotion, this is for the reason that to allow it in would be to intellectualise emotion in an unacceptable fashion. But this argument erroneously assumes that, inside emotion, thought will operate in the same way as it does inside, say, inquiry, and it overlooks the fact (...) that thought is a merely instrumental disposition. Thought takes on an end from the outside. So, when thinking is made to serve inquiry, it serves the end that inquiry pursues: it aids in the construction, or purification, of some truth-oriented picture of the world. *Equally, when thinking is recruited into the service of emotion, it helps to strengthen, or elaborate upon, some attitude that we have towards something in, or held to be in, the world.* It follows that, if thinking intellectualises belief, there is no reason to conclude that it will intellectualise emotion.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Emotions presuppose beliefs, judgements, and desires, which are the product of a social order. In this sense, cognitivists believe that emotions are socially constructed. Some of our emotions are better considered than others and they move individuals to identify with democratic goals, for examples. It would be preposterous to blame emotion for bad or undemocratic identifications: reason and emotion can both serve good or bad, democratic or undemocratic, moral or immoral

purposes. Blaming the passion for all that is problematic in the world of politics is, therefore, one-sided and incomplete.

Morphologically, cognitivists believe the object of an emotion is made up of instigation, a target and an objective; for example, in the case of indignation, the instigation is the experience of a violation, the target is the person who inflicted the violation, and the objective is the correction, of the violation (punishment, compensation, etc.).<sup>xxvii</sup> Individuals' experience of a certain emotion – in terms of its proper instigation, target, and objective – is dependent on their having internalised the rules that reflect the social norms guiding interaction within a particular community.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The idea that emotions have cognitive content and can be socialised according to rules of appropriateness reveals the connection between cognitivism and constructivism. Constructivism in the theory of emotions comes in two varieties: a weak one – that gives both the biological and the social a role in the make-up of emotion – and a strong one – according to which emotions are socially constructed 'all the way down'.<sup>xxix</sup> The thesis that politically relevant emotions – such as indignation and hope – have been significantly shaped by their socio-cultural environment and are attached to various forms of identification requires us to embrace a constructivist account of emotion. Successful emotional socialisation results in the formation of context-appropriate emotions and their expression in contextually sensitive responses.

However, if we are to – at least partially – accommodate the Lacanian insight about the impossibility of a perfectly transparent self, we need to opt for the weak version of constructivism, the version that acknowledges the fact that socialization does not go 'all the way

down' and that the biological plays a crucial, and often unpredictable, role in affective experiences.

The weak constructivist cognitivist classifies the social rules orienting emotional expression into constitutive, regulative, and heuristic.<sup>xxx</sup> Constitutive rules cover the appropriateness of the emotion's object; e.g., one cannot be angry at the moon. Regulative rules determine how emotions should be experienced and expressed internally and, if the conditions are favourable, externally, i.e., behaviourally.<sup>xxxi</sup> Regulative rules cover the type and intensity of behavioural responses that express the emotion as well as the time span and progression of emotional events. Last but not least, heuristic rules belong to the art of finely tuning one's emotional manifestations and constitute the object of adult emotional development. However, having rules does not mean that they provide precise formulae for emotional experience. Judgment is involved in the evaluation of the situation provoking the emotional reaction, the identification of the appropriate target, and the selection of the particular response. Building on Aristotle, but allowing for variance within and among communities, constructivists believe that, throughout their life, individuals learn *to feel the right emotion, on the right occasion, toward the right object and in the right degree*.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In time, they learn to take responsibility for their emotional reactions in particular contexts. Weak constructivist cognitivists argue that it is possible to subject emotional responses to critical appraisal based on how accurately the individual evaluated the situation eliciting the emotional response according to the norms inherent in the symbolic order and how appropriately she translated this evaluation in her behaviour. Appropriateness is a function of norm



internalisation, i.e. of the reasonableness of actions motivated by emotions.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Thus, objectively,

(I)f emotions are cognition based, then this allows that they can be subjected to rational persuasion and criticism. For example, agents can be reasoned out of their anger just because the emotion is based on attitudes which can themselves be critically appraised in respect of whether they form an accurate or reasonable construal of the situation. If the agent misinterprets the situation as an insult, then we expect and consider him able to relinquish his anger. This point is relevant to constructionism because it allows that emotions can be endorsed or condemned with respect to the social appropriateness of the attitudes by which the emotion is generated, and that agents can be held responsible for the possession or absence of those emotion attitudes which are socially required for a situation.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

and subjectively,

(I)t is important to stress continually the difference between the emotion itself as a judgement and our reflective judgements about our emotions (judgements about our judgements). My being angry is my making a judgement; my recognition that I am angry is a reflective judgement about my anger (as is my judgement that my anger is justified, that, on reflection, the other person deserves [or doesn't deserve] my wrath, etc.).<sup>xxxv</sup>

Given the malleability of emotion in relation to reflective judgement, it is clear that emotions can and are meant to fulfil important functions in the reproduction of the collectivity,<sup>xxxvi</sup> both in terms of limiting undesirable behaviour and encouraging the wider endorsement of the values defining the group's identity. Yet, in tune with Lacanian theorising, weak constructivists argue that, the expression of socially inappropriate emotions sometimes shows the limits of emotional education and the resilience of a biological substratum of needs and instincts that cannot be socialised away.

What does this all mean for an agonistic theory of politics in which emotion plays an important role in identification and mobilisation? Like cognitivists, Mouffe claims the dichotomy between reason and emotion is overdrawn and that passions play a political role alongside rational deliberation. Politically relevant emotions must, however, 'fit' with the ethico-political principles of a democratic society. In other words, political emotions are democratically appropriate to the extent that they attach to democratic collective identifications, identifications that are compatible with an adversarial mode of politics. As I argue in more detail in the section that follows, since agonistic encounters require adversaries to refrain from certain ways of engaging with one another, politically relevant emotions must not violate certain rules of engagement with the different other, the very rules that undergird a democratic ethos and that that make agonism possible. The ethico-political principles of the community give content to constitutive, regulative and heuristic rules that should orient the affective dimension of citizens' political identifications. In other words, while passionate confrontations are the essence of agonistic politics, not all emotions and not all ways of expressing them are conducive to adversarial encounters. Once emotions are attached to undemocratic identities, agonistic politics degenerates. Therefore

Mouffe is correct to argue that preparing emotions for agonism places burdens on democratic institutions: they must first, provide arenas for agonistic encounters and second, encourage the development of a variety of meaningful sources of democratic identification. In the section that follows I elaborate on these ideas and sketch one possible way Mouffe might want to slightly modify her theoretical account of ‘passions’ in order to make it compatible with democratic agonism.

### III. Emotions Fit for Adversaries

As we saw in the previous section, weak constructivist cognitivists firmly believe that emotions presuppose evaluations and are amenable to change. The educability of emotion is particularly important for democratic politics, for emotion is part and parcel of a society’s political culture. Political regimes need to encourage certain kinds of affect in order to reproduce politically over time.

Mouffe is very much aware of this and she addresses the problem of democratic affective identifications in terms of availability: of institutional arenas for agonistic encounters and of democratic collective options.<sup>xxxvii</sup> What is more, she argues against ever-present tendencies of moralising public discourse, a trend that she thinks mobilises aggressive passions and destroys the agonistic public sphere. Let us discuss these solutions in turn.

First, Mouffe is particularly attentive to the need for institutionalised fora that constitute proper spaces for agonistic encounters between passionately motivated citizens. In her view, it is crucial

that politically relevant passions between adversaries can find an outlet where they can be publicly scrutinised and engaged constructively. And it is the democratic institutions' duty to provide open arenas for dissenters to give voice to their concerns. In their absence, Mouffe argues, sidelined passions would fester and erupt in destabilising and undemocratic ways. She illustrates her point by referring to the case of the riots in Paris's *banlieues*. Mouffe reads these events as the consequence of an institutional failure to give voice to a disgruntled youth.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In her view, institutions should imaginatively create opportunities and loci where citizens can meet as adversaries, thus foreclosing the possibility that agonism turn into antagonism.

Secondly, she is very critical of the convergence of the traditional Left and Right parties at the centre. Ensuring there are sufficient meaningful democratic identifications for emotions to attach to – both on the Right and on the Left of the political spectrum – is key to preventing citizens' identification with extreme options. Mouffe addresses historical parties and their ideologues, urging them to understand that a contraction of the space between the democratic Right and the democratic Left can leave citizens without hope and push them in radically undemocratic directions. They will emotionally identify with political programmes that undermine agonism. The main democratic parties must become aware of the perils involved in their moving towards the centre. It is high time they left behind the idea of the 'post-political consensus' and came up with a variety of programmes that could constitute meaningful political sources of identification for citizens.

Thirdly, we must consider the danger of the moralisation of political debates in contemporary democracies, an issue Mouffe is particularly concerned about. By antagonising political agents

and polarising political debates, such a phenomenon is likely to undermine the adversarial relationships that agonism presupposes. Moralism – the undue use of moral categories in political debates – results in the demonization of the different other and puts a stop to respectful debates. We have replaced the opposition between Right and Left with the opposition between Good and Evil. Self-righteous indignation can push actors to see their adversaries as enemies to be rid of, rather than equals to engage with. Depoliticizing democratic encounters and moralising them can only lead to a deterioration of democratic debates and their slide into inimical confrontations.

In delineating these three possible solutions to the problem of undemocratic affect, Mouffe advances our understanding of democratic politics beyond the simplistic version proposed by those who prefer to eliminate passions altogether from politics. However, her seeing the democratic affective identification as merely a matter of availability makes it difficult for us to account for the individuals' duty to treat each other respectfully, as adversaries and not as enemies. If we are to endorse an understanding of the passionate, yet respectful citizens, who engage with the others in struggles over different visions of their political life, we need to see them as at least potentially responsive to interpellations regarding their affective political involvement. An agonistic account of citizenship must presuppose that political emotions can be engaged with and channelled democratically, i.e. intersubjectively and publicly, through persuasion and exhortation. In what follows, I propose that agonists need to incorporate, beyond the availability solutions, an account of how individuals can be democratically encouraged to take responsibility for their emotions. Keeping 'at bay' or 'defusing' antagonism<sup>xxxix</sup> requires the cooperation of democratic citizens as agents, whose emotions must be understood as partially

permeable to democratic, public engagement. In this sense, this paper follows Robert Solomon's injunction according to which *[P]ersonal responsibility is an important piece of the emotions story, and any theory that does not face up to this is itself political – or politically irresponsible.*<sup>xi</sup>

In her *The Trouble with Passion: Political Theory beyond the Reign of Reason*<sup>xli</sup> Cheryl Hall offers us an account of emotional education that is compatible with democratic agonism and at the same time incorporates the possibility of responsibility for political expressions of affect. Building on her views on emotional education, I will then add three more elements that I think an agonistic theory of democracy should take into consideration in developing its take on emotions.

Hall shares with Mouffe the critique of those who want to eradicate passions from politics. Like Mouffe, she believes that emotions play a crucial role in political identification, moving people in pursuit of their vision of the good:

In order to become politically involved, then, people must care about an issue, *they must have some vision of how things ought to be done, and they must have hope that at least some progress can be made towards realizing this vision.* But this caring, this vision and this hope are precisely the work of passion. It is passion that motivates people to engage with the world around them and try to make a difference in their lives.<sup>xlii</sup>

Therefore, the trouble with passions is not that they are present in politics, but that sometimes they get attached to undemocratic identities (racism, xenophobia, ultra-nationalism) or are manifested in non-democratic ways.<sup>xliii</sup> The issue, therefore, is not to eliminate passions, but to

encourage citizens to do two things: first, cultivate a passion *for* democracy itself and second, work *with* their passions in view of deciding which of their passionate commitments are compatible with democracy and worth keeping. While the first dimension is clearly accounted for in Mouffe's theory, the second is in need of more theoretical attention. I argue that a complete theory of politically relevant emotion should take into account this second dimension as it adds an important layer of complexity to our understanding of agonistic affect.

First, Hall argues citizens must develop a passion for democracy. They must become enthusiastic and committed to the process of debating, collaborating, and exchanging views with others. This always implies refraining from violence, even when fundamentally challenged by disagreement. In the vocabulary of theories of emotions, the constitutive, regulative and heuristic rules regulating politically relevant affect will get their content from the ethico-political principles that undergird democracy. In Mouffe's terms, the aim is to cultivate a passion for democracy as a regime that makes politics possible against the background of fundamental, ineradicable disagreement. In other words, an affective identification with the democratic ethos must underlie all political engagements.

Secondly, working with one's passions does not imply submitting passions to reason, in the way in which liberal and deliberative democrats have argued. On the contrary, it involves working with both reason and passion in view of fostering 'more generous forms of reason-passion.'<sup>xliv</sup> Hall claims that taking responsibility for political passions requires citizens to make an effort and become aware of the presuppositions of their passionate political identities, reflect on the beliefs underlying emotions and, upon encountering the different other, decide whether

such beliefs are compatible with the democratic ethos. They must be responsive and open to exhortations about the forms of affective engagement that are permissible in an agonistic public sphere. Good democratic citizenship, in Hall's view, requires the willingness and capacity to take responsibility for passions and the political identities they are attached to. Rather than being fully ruled by passions, citizens can learn to take some distance from their affectively-anchored commitments and choose from alternative courses of action those that are at the same time conducive to achieving their goals and compatible with a respect for the adversary.

This is, I think, the missing element from Mouffe's account of political affect. While the availability solution is an important part of the puzzle, we will not have overcome the dichotomy between reason and emotion until we see citizens as at least partially responsible for their affective identifications. Such a suggestion does not in any way mark a return to the perfectly transparent self of liberal discourse. On the contrary, along Lacanian lines, weak constructivist cognitivists accept the idea that emotional socialisation presupposes an asymmetrical relationship of power and that it cannot fully master the biological substratum: the self can only be partially transparent to itself and 'socially inappropriate' emotions can sometimes be experienced. What is more, they would argue that, in the absence of institutional fora and opportunities for agonistic encounters, emotions often sit uneasily with democratic values. Yet, if Mouffe excludes the possibility that they could be democratically and publicly engaged and filtered, she is reproducing the same understanding of affect – as passive, uncontrollable, and in need of 'management' – that liberal and deliberative democrats propose. Until we understand that emotion presupposes – alongside physiological reactions – thought, until we understand that it can be socialised to serve democratic agendas, until we affirm its malleability and responsiveness



to agonistic persuasion and exhortations, we will not be able to account for the productive force that it can play politically.

In order to give concreteness to the guidelines enumerated above, let us now briefly turn to the two emotions that Mouffe herself refers to most frequently: hope and indignation. They both represent important forces behind collective identification and illustrate two forms of emotional reaction: one positive (hope) and one negative (indignation).

The main problem with the proponents of rationalist accounts of politics is that they do not understand that effective political agendas manage to connect with people's desires and fantasies, or, in other words, manage to give content to people's hopes. It is hope that moves citizens to care and engage with each other in pursuit of their political vision. Without hope, they sink into apathy, which leaves the current hegemony untouched. Sometimes, dissatisfaction with politics pushes actors towards the extremes of the political spectrum: when no meaningful political programme comes from democratic parties, passions latch onto political agendas inimical to democracy itself. This is why, Mouffe thinks, it is a duty of traditional parties to offer distinctive political programmes. It is high time parties left behind 'the third way' and concentrated their efforts in view of providing a palette of diverse political choices that citizens could identify with and hope for.

However, the existence of meaningful choices, on its own, is only one part of the solution. In addition, institutions must give voice to those who dissent from the hopes that drive the hegemonic political discourses. To the extent that the different visions that drive dissenters are

compatible with an agonistic ethos, no one should be silenced. Giving proper venue to those who expound alternative hopes for a democratic future will ensure that repressed passions will not end up undermining democracy itself.

Mouffe thinks that citizens must treat each other as passionate adversaries, i.e. as equal sources of legitimate claims who happen to disagree. While hope is an important motivator in politics, not all hopes and not all actions motivated by hope are democratically appropriate. The symbolic space that adversaries share determines which hopes and which ways of pursuing those hopes are democratically permissible. In the language of theories of emotions, hopes must get their content from democratically appropriate visions, be expressed in ways that do not diminish adversaries to enemies, and target the reproduction of the democratic project across generations. This implies that viewing those we disagree with as subhuman or evil and identifying ourselves with programmes that seek their elimination violates the shared ethic-political principles underlying agonism.

As mentioned above, Mouffe does not say much about citizens' responsibility for their passions. Yet her understanding of the distinction between enemy and adversary makes it apparent that 'the management' of hope cannot be just a matter of availability of democratic identifications. Citizens must work themselves *with* their own hopes and make them compatible with democracy. They can be democratically engaged and persuaded to consider which desires and fantasies are compatible with a passionate commitment to a democratic identity: they do have some capacity to assume responsibility for the objects of their hope and for the actions they want to take in pursuing their hopes. To give an example, Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream'

speech could be plausibly considered as an invitation addressed to an angry public to nurture hope for a future of racial equality, an invitation that excludes the option of physical violence: his hope is a passionate one, fit for adversaries, not for enemies.<sup>xlv</sup> While the speech recognises the indignation experienced by African-Americans, it talks to their passions and invites them to pursue their hope for a more equal America in a way that does not violate America's democratic ethos. It could be safely argued that King managed to persuade the emotionally committed, yet responsive, public that democracy required them to follow their dream passionately, yet agonistically.

King's speech is also a good starting point for thinking of democratic indignation. Indignation is generally thought to correspond to the experience of a wrong. As such, it is considered by most philosophers of emotion to be a moral emotion. Since, according to Mouffe, morality is not the right register for politics, indignation should not – *prima facie* – play a role in an agonistic democracy. Indignation moralises politics and downgrades adversaries to enemies. Mouffe is particularly bothered by the Left's self-righteousness towards the new extreme Right movements in Europe and condemns their apolitical response to the emergence of such movements: they secured their own goodness by demonizing the other. She is also painfully aware of how indignation often leads to political violence and endangers the democratic game. The Greek and Parisian riots of 2008 represent clear instances where vehement indignation and anger made it so that agonism degenerated into antagonism.

But is this Mouffe's final condemnation of indignation in politics? Given that I have been arguing for a weak constructivist cognitivist account of agonistic emotions, I believe there is

room for a certain kind of indignation in Mouffe's democratic theory. I argue that we can make a fruitful distinction between indignation directed at the destruction of adversarial politics and indignation oriented by the ethico-political principles that the members of a democratic community share. The former is anti-democratic, while the latter can further democratic goals by drawing attention to political injustices and democratic deficits.

How would agonistic indignation look like? I believe that a certain type of indignation could negatively mobilise citizens to enter agonistic games without thereby dehumanizing those we disagree with. Indignation can move citizens to mobilize politically and propose an alternative reading of the ethico-political values undergirding democracy. King's speech tells us what democratically appropriate indignation looks like. His indignant calls for a rethinking of the American people's understanding of the constitutionally sanctioned idea of equality are addressed to his white 'brothers', not to his white enemies. He understands the emotional dimension of exclusion and oppression, but convinces his audience that indignation cannot undermine the ethico-political foundations of the American democracy. While emotion fuels agonism, it should not transform antagonism into antagonism. The Spanish *Indignados*, the Egyptian 'days of rage' or the Turkish protests in Gezi Park in Istanbul are just three other illustrations of how political indignation can trigger signals of alarm about important democratic deficits and agonistically challenge hegemonic interpretations of the ethico-political values. Provided indignation makes reference to values democratic societies cherish and is expressed in ways that do not disqualify one's opponents from the status of adversary, it can further agonistic politics. Hopefully, it will also destabilise the current hegemony.

Let me now conclude this brief exercise in theoretical reconstruction. Only if we understand that politically relevant emotions do presuppose some cognitive content and that they are not fully impermeable to persuasion and exhortation, can we begin to see how their force could be harnessed in view of achieving democratic goals. Emotions do change and, while availability of democratic collective identifications is crucial, citizens can be publicly engaged and provoked to rethink their passionate attachments. An agonistic account of democratic politics cannot conceive of citizens as being blindly driven by passions. This is not to argue that emotions should be subjected to rational scrutiny, but only to argue that a public, intersubjective engagement with emotions is possible. Agonism depends on citizens' capacity to work with their affective commitments, to adjust them and make them compatible with the democratic ethos. Once we overcome the reductionist opposition between reason and emotion, once we manage to distinguish between democratically problematic and productive forms of affect, once we understand how sophisticated citizens' affective register truly is, we can begin to think constructively about the role that affect can play in maintaining the democratic agon alive.

## Conclusion

This paper began by outlining Mouffe's views on the essence of democratic politics and her critique of the unwarranted purging of the public space of all forms of affect, a strategy she thinks is typical of dominant liberal-democratic political theory. I then moved on to propose that a weak constructivist cognitivist account of politically relevant emotions is required by the

agonistic theory of politics. I argued that it is only by theorising affect as presupposing evaluations about the political world and as malleable to transformation through agonistic encounters that we can conceive of the ways in which it can serve the cause of democracy. In other words, only if we presuppose that passions have cognitive content and are at least partially transparent to persuasion and interpellation that we can begin to discuss how best to valorise their potential. Based on Mouffe's conception of agonism, I tried to distinguish between emotions and modes of affective expression that are compatible with adversarial encounters from those that are not. Hope and indignation were discussed illustratively, to give substance to the claim that only those emotions that are oriented by the ethico-political principles shared by the members of the political community are democratically appropriate. The paper explored the responsibilities that institutions but also individuals have regarding the moulding of hope and indignation in democratic forms. Following in Mouffe's footsteps, I concluded that it is time democratic theory accepted the challenge posed by passions and found a way to include and fructify their potential for collective political action.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For a recent review of democratic theorists' reluctance to take emotion seriously see Michael E. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking and Deliberation* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> For an insightful reconstruction of the ways in which Mouffe (and others) takes up the Lacanian provocation of thinking about affect, see Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) and *The Lacanian Left* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p.75-76.

<sup>iv</sup> Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, p.26.

<sup>v</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, (London: Routledge, 2005), p.15.

<sup>vi</sup> See Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, pp.36-37.

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- vii Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 101; *On the Political*, p.3.
- viii Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?' in *Political Science Series*, the Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna, 2000, [http://www.ihs.ac.at/publications/pol/pw\\_72.pdf](http://www.ihs.ac.at/publications/pol/pw_72.pdf) [9 January 2013].
- ix Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.14.
- x Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.20.
- xi Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.30.
- xii Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.30. She makes the same point in Chantal Mouffe, 'Politics and Passions: the Stakes of Democracy', *Ethical Perspectives*, 7(2000), pp.146-150.
- xiii Chantal Mouffe, 'Politics and passions: introduction', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28(2002), pp.615-616.
- xiv Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Mary Zournazi, 'Hope, Passion and the New World Order. Mary Zournazi in conversation with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau', *Contretemps*, 2(May 2001), p.41.
- xv Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.76.
- xvi Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.74.
- xvii Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.149.
- xviii Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy', p.16.
- xix Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.120.
- xx Claire Armon Jones, 'The Thesis of Constructionism', in *Philosophy and the Emotions. A Reader*, ed. Stephen Leighton (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003), pp.186-188.
- xxi Richard Wollheim, *On the Emotions* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p.15.
- xxii Solomon, 'On Emotions as Judgments,' in *Philosophy and the Emotions*, p.175.
- xxiii For seminal contributions, see Eroll Bedford, 'Emotions', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 57 (1956-1957), pp.281-304; Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) and "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance" in *Thinking about Feeling. Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.183-213.
- xxiv Robert C. Solomon, 'On Emotions as Judgements', in *Philosophy and the Emotions*, p.168.
- xxv Solomon, *The Passions*.
- xxvi Wollheim, *On the Emotions*, p.117. Emphasis added.
- xxvii Averill presents these three possible components of the object of an emotion but says that not all are present in all emotions. He exemplifies these components and the way in which the rules of emotion apply in his book length treatment of anger and its relationship with aggression. See James R. Averill, *Anger and Aggression: An Essay on Emotion* (New York NY: Springer-Verlag, 1982).
- xxviii James R. Averill, 'The Acquisition of Emotions during Adulthood', in *The Social Construction of Emotion*, ed. Rom Harré (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp.98-118 (106).
- xxix Seminal texts on the social constructivist view of emotions are Roger Scruton, 'Emotion, Practical Knowledge and Common Culture' in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp.519-536; James R Averill, 'A Constructivist View of Emotion', in *Emotion: Theory, Research, and Experience*, Vol. I,

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*Theories of Emotion*, ed. Robert Plutchik and Henry Kellerman (New York NY: Academic Press, 1980), pp.305-339, *Anger and Aggression* and 'The Acquisition of Emotions during Adulthood', in *The Social Construction of Emotion*; Armon Jones, 'The Social Functions of Emotion', in *The Social Construction of Emotion*, pp.57-82 and 'The Thesis of Constructionism', in *Philosophy and the Emotions*, pp.181-203; Patricia Greenspan, 'Learning Emotions and Ethics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotions*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.539-559. They are opposed by universalist evolutionist theories such as that expounded by P. E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* (Chicago IL: Chicago University Press: 1997).

<sup>xxx</sup> In what follows I shall follow Averill's typology of rules regarding emotions. See Averill, 'The Acquisition of Emotions', p.106-109.

<sup>xxxi</sup> See Wollheim, *On the Emotions*, pp.115, 128.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Scruton, 'Emotion, Practical Knowledge and Common Culture', p.522.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Greenspan operationalises emotional appropriateness in terms of the emotions' relationship to cultural norms and their practical consequences. Calhoun adds the emotion's biographical fit as yet one more dimension of appropriateness. See Patricia Greenspan, 'Emotions, Rationality, and Mind/Body', and Cheshire Calhoun, 'Subjectivity and Emotions', in *Thinking about Feeling*, pp.125-134, 107-121.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Armon Jones, 'The Thesis of Constructionism', p.191.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Robert C. Solomon, 'A Subjective Theory of the Passions', in *Philosophy and the Emotions*, p.171. While constructivists allow for some degree of passivity of the emotion, they claim that we often interpret our reactions as passive rather than active and this reproduces the common image of passions as passive: 'an emotion is a transitory social role (a socially constituted syndrome) that includes an individual's appraisal of the situation and that is interpreted as a passion rather than as an action.' Averill, 'The Acquisition of Emotions', p.312.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Armon Jones, 'The Social Functions of Emotion.'

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p.104.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> 'Chantal Mouffe – From antagonistic politics to an agonistic public space', Interview with Gia Galati and Konstantin Kastrissianakis, *Re-Public*, <http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=2801> [9 April 2013].

<sup>xxxix</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.16,19.

<sup>xl</sup> Robert C. Solomon, 'The Politics of Emotion', in *Bringing the Passions Back In: The Emotions in Political Philosophy*, ed. Len Ferry and Rebecca Kingston (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), p.203. **Accommodating such a demand would require a slight departure from the Lacanian account of the self. While I cannot fully address this issue here, this article invites agonists to reflect on whether such a partial modification is worth the theoretical gain I am proposing here.**

<sup>xli</sup> Cheryl Hall, *The Trouble with Passion: Political Theory beyond the Reign of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>xlii</sup> Hall, *The Trouble with Passion*, p.125. Emphasis added.

<sup>xliii</sup> Hall, *The Trouble with Passion*, p.30.

<sup>xliv</sup> Hall, *The Trouble with Passion*, p.121.

<sup>xliv</sup> Martin Luther King, 'I have a dream', delivered on August 28, 1963, the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. Full text available at:

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm> (accessed June 12, 2013).